

Relief Fire Company Engine House

The Relief Fire Company — a fire house, at the Meeting House? Yes, it is true, and while we do not know what the Relief Fire Company's engine house looked like, we do know that it housed two fire engines and that it was located here for four decades beginning in 1794. We also know that the engine house possessed direct access to Fairfax Street, a requirement stated in writing, and that it was located immediately to the north east of the Meeting House. The Alexandria Relief Society, which owned the fire engines, had been formed as the town's third volunteer fire association, with a large number of its members drawn from our congregation, in 1788 (McKenney 1958, Hart 2007). Alexandria's other early fire associations — Friendship Fire Company, dating from 1774; Sun Fire Company, dating from 1775; and Star Fire Company, dating from 1805 — stored their engines at Market Square or on in the churchyard of Christ Episcopal Church.

The structure that housed the two engines was not large, as fire engines in the days of hand-pumped engines were not large, and volunteers were required to keep personal gear and equipment at home or at their place of work, so storage requirements were limited to accommodating the engines. To get some idea of the size of fire engines in those days, visit the hand-pumped engine dating from 1851 at the Friendship Fire Company Museum on South Alfred Street — though nothing like the size of today's engines, this engine is significantly larger than the earlier ones housed in the Meeting House churchyard. Both of the earlier-model engines stored at the Meeting House would probably just about fit into the space now occupied by the air conditioning unit located to the north of the bell tower.

The Meeting House churchyard was a good location for engines to service the south side of town — Fairfax Street then served as Alexandria's "Main Street", so many important businesses were nearby; the churchyard sits on relatively high ground and it is much easier to haul an engine down a hill than up; and our bell was the only one in town from 1790 to 1817, so it served as the communication's system for the general public as well as a call to worshippers that services would soon begin.

When the Meeting House was expanded to include a narthex following the 1835 fire, the engine company relocated a block further north on Fairfax Street. Eventually the engine company relocated to Prince Street. The two structures the company subsequently built there both still stand — the older Relief Fire Company station, at 319 Prince Street, dates from 1852 and now serves as a residence; Relief Fire and Engine Company No. 1, at 317 Prince Street, dates from 1915 and remains an active unit of the Alexandria Fire Department.